

An Investigation of the Mind

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The following teaching is an explanation of the way to examine the mind according to a text written by Lama Mipham, called “The Wheel of Investigation and Meditation That Thoroughly Purifies Mental Activity.” Why is this teaching called the “wheel of investigation”? Because just as a wheel revolves all the time, we need to constantly investigate the true nature of things. This constant investigation will eliminate deluded thoughts and lead to an understanding of the true nature of the mind.

How do we investigate the nature of mind and the root of samsaric delusion? The very root of delusion is the thought of “I,” the habit of clinging to the notion of a “self.” This notion is simply due to a failure to investigate. There is no such thing as a truly existing, autonomous self. We fabricated this concept in the same way that we make up all our other thoughts. Then, after constructing this self over and over again, we get so used to our invention that it seems to really exist as a distinct entity.

Once this thought has deeply taken root, we demand that the self should be happy and comfortable, enjoying wealth and pleasures. If it could be the center of the universe, that would be the best. This attitude is the very basis for our wandering around and around in samsara.

We associate the self with our body, our name, and our mind. If, however, we examine it carefully, the first thing we find is that the self is a product of the mind. So let us examine this mind that is responsible for such a close identification with the self.

In brief, we can say that the mind consists of past, present, and future thoughts.

Our past thoughts are likened to a shattered vase or a corpse—there is absolutely nothing left of the vase or the once-living person but a memory. Take just the thoughts you had since this morning. Is there any trace of them left that you can grasp or point to? Nothing remains but your remembrance of them.

What about our present thoughts? At this moment, for instance, you think that you are reading the teacher’s instructions and you should pay attention to them. This gives rise to a host of other thoughts in your mind. But can you point to an exact place where these thoughts are located?

See whether, in your own experience, you can find a location for your present thoughts. First look at the body. Are your thoughts in your head, your brain, or your chest? Are they on the skin, in the bones, inside the intestines, or in any other part of this body? The more you look, the less you are able to find a location for present thoughts.

What about the nature of thought itself? If the mind truly existed, if it were something we could see or hear, we certainly should be able to define it in some way. That, however, is not the case.

Examine a single thought that you believe to exist. Right now, for instance, you are reading these words and understand their meaning. So there is definitely a mind that is conscious of something. But if that mind exists, it should surely have some characteristics. Any object we look at has a color, a shape, some kind of texture. But is the mind yellow, white, or black? Is it round, oblong, or asymmetrical? Does a tall person have a big mind? Does a short person have a small mind? Does the mind look like a bird, a cat, or any wild animal? Is it like diffuse, a cloud?

Does the present mind have any tangible characteristic that you can define? When you conduct such an examination, no matter how long you work at it, you cannot pin down any characteristics of your mind.

Now try to examine your future thoughts. Do you know what thoughts will go through your mind from now until tomorrow? There is no way for anyone to anticipate thoughts that have not yet been born.

So, whether we consider past, present, or future thoughts, there is nothing we can define as being a “mind” entity. If we take one hundred beads and thread them together, we call that a rosary. But as soon as the thread is removed and the beads are scattered, there is no more rosary. “Rosary” was just a name that we attached to a collection of odds things that were connected for a while. In the same way, past thoughts, present thoughts, and future thoughts appear to be strung together, and we call that appearance the “mind.” In actual fact there is no such entity. Past thoughts no longer exist, while present thoughts seem to exist now. How could the nonexistent and the existent come together to constitute an entity? Existence and nonexistence have nothing in common. Imagine trying to use a cattle’s horn, which is a real object, in combination with a “rabbit’s horn,” which is unreal. Although the rabbit’s horn has a kind of existence as a fictional thing, it is radically different in nature from a real horn, and they cannot be accommodated within a single entity. The same reasoning applies to future thoughts. How could the present,

which is manifesting now, and the future, which is not yet born, have any contact with each other?

Now the only thing we are left with is the present mind. So let's see whether it has a tangible existence. Certainly it has some kind of presence. For instance, someone coming to a monastery thinks in the morning: "There will be some teaching this afternoon, and I should attend." Because of that thought, when the afternoon comes, the person receives the teaching. So, the moment a thought arises, it has some power to make us act. It appears to have an existence. But what kind of existence?

Our belief in a continuous mind arises from the fact that we cannot perceive extremely short instants of consciousness that follow one another in rapid succession. If a needle is quickly and forcefully pushed through a stack of sixty leaves, it seems as though the needle pierced them all at once. In reality, the needle passed through the leaves one by one. It is said that in the time it takes to snap your fingers, at least sixty thoughts are formed in your mind. The process of mind is actually made up of small instances of thoughts that seem to be continuous, but only because we do not see the movements of these instantaneous thoughts.

If we look at the moon and press our eyes with our fingers, we see two moons. These two moons certainly appear, but they don't possess true existence. In the same way, through the power of delusion the mind appears in many ways and we mistakenly think of it as an entity.

All we can say is that the mind is manifesting and at the same time ungraspable. When you eat a mouthful of delicious food, your mind becomes happy. If someone comes and calls you a thief, you get upset. So, on the one hand, the mind perceives the world and reacts to it. On the other hand, if we look for the mind, we cannot find anything tangible. The mind is something that appears, yet is devoid of true existence: it manifests in an illusory way.

The same is true of our concepts of self and body. Our notion of the physical body as a unified entity cannot hold up under close examination. If we were to cut a body into pieces and put the skin to one side, the bones on the other side, and the organs somewhere else, then there would be nothing left of what we once called "the body."

By assembling a few sticks of wood and pieces of cloth and arranging them in a certain way, we create something we call "a tent." If, however, we remove a few pieces of wood, everything collapses. In the same way, the body is just a name, a collection of things that come together for a certain length of time. In actual fact there is no such thing as a body, only a concept.

We can take this investigation further by looking closely at the separated parts—the skin, the bones, the blood. We then break these down into finer and finer component particles until nothing at all is left that we can call skin or bones. Likewise, we can persist in analyzing any concept until any illusory entity such as a body vanishes into nothing.

At the moment, there are combinations of different parts of our body and mind, and while we are alive these parts remain together. But even though the mind is impossible to locate in the eyes or the brain, it possesses the faculty of knowing. When we see with our eyes, taste with our tongues, or feel with our hands, this is only possible because of the intimate association between body and mind. Yet the mind is in no way an integral part of the body. It does not reside in the body and is not an inherent entity.

At the time of death, consciousness enters the intermediate state (*bardo*) and the body is left behind as a corpse. At that moment the corpse cannot see or feel, nor can it react to events with pleasure or displeasure. Once body and mind are separated, not a trace of the mental faculties will remain with the body.

In addition to identifying with our body and our mind, we also cling strongly to our name, because we associate our “self” or “ego” with it. It is quite easy to recognize that there is nothing to this. For example, if we are called John, when we hear someone calling “John,” it has a strong effect on us. But this name is merely an assemblage of letters. If we separate these letters—*J*, *o*, *h*, and *n*—they no longer evoke our name and we don’t identify with it or react to it.

We have thus seen that the three main things that we identify with our self or ego are our body, our name, and our mind. But none of these truly provides a basis for a “self” entity to dwell. The self or ego is a mere concept. Identifying with the ego begins the process of delusion and suffering. From believing in the existence of self, we then proceed to thinking of “I,” “my,” and “mine”—my body, my clothes, my house, my relatives, my friends, my enemies. This is how we create a fundamental split between the “I” and the rest of the world. From this split comes the impulse of grasping at whatever we expect will be pleasant or useful to the self. Or the opposite: we feel aversion toward anything that threatens or displeases the self. All these attachments arise because of clinging to the “I.” Thus we maintain a continuum of mental confusion and basic ignorance.

We think there is an ego when there is none, we think there is a body when there is no “body” entity, and we think of our name as having true existence on its own when there is no

such entity. To believe in the true existence of things that are devoid of intrinsic reality is the essence of ignorance. So those three processes—ignorance, attachment, and aversion—are the three root poisons responsible for the delusions and suffering of samsara.

If we examine those things in themselves, their true nature is simply empty of true existence. But we must experience directly whether this is true or not, and for this we need to examine the nature of our own mind, body, and name.

If you actually look and fail to find anything, you will be compelled to recognize the void nature of phenomena. In this way you ultimately reach a complete realization of emptiness, and then you clearly understand how the roots of samsara have taken hold. It is a very important practice to undertake such an investigation for yourself.

Commentary on the Verses

NAMO, MANJUSHRI YE

The text begins by paying homage to Manjushri, the ultimate manifestation of wisdom. Many great teachers, including Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and Lama Mipham, had visions of Manjushri.

*Whatever problems there are in the world
Are created by the afflictions in our own minds.
A mistaken attitude is a cause for the kleshas,
Yet the pattern of our thoughts can be refined.*

As we have seen, the very root of samsara is the concept of self and our habit of clinging to our identification with an “ego.”

The most primary basis for clinging to the notion of self is the aggregate of *form*—that is, the body. When this body undergoes various experiences, we perceive some things as pleasant and desire them. Other things are perceived as unpleasant and we want to get rid of them. This corresponds to the second aggregate, *feeling*.

The third aggregate is discrimination. We start to discriminate between what is pleasant and what is unpleasant.

The fourth aggregate is impulse. Once we have identified something as being pleasant, desire for it arises. At the same time, we want to get rid of whatever is unpleasant and try to accomplish this in various ways. What actually experiences the ensuing feelings of satisfaction or misery is *consciousness*, the fifth aggregate. Consciousness itself has five aspects, related to sight, hearing, smell, touch, and mental consciousness. Prior to these five aspects and underlying them at all times, there is a basic, undetermined ground consciousness, which corresponds to a vague perception of the outer world and of existence, an awareness that “there is a world out there.”

It is to all these aggregates coming together that we attach the notion of a self. As a result the aggregates become intimately linked with suffering. However, when we try to investigate these different elements, one by one, they cannot withstand analysis. They have no shape, no color, no location. We cannot determine where they come from, where they remain, and where they go. In no way do they constitute autonomous entities.

In truth, the notion of self we attach to the aggregates is a mere mental fabrication, a label put on something that does not exist. People who wear tinted glasses or suffer from a visual impairment would see a white conch as yellow, even though the conch has never been anything but white. In the same way, our deluded minds attribute reality to something that is utterly nonexistent.

This is what we call ignorance: not recognizing the void nature of phenomena and assuming that phenomena possess the attribute of true existence although in fact they are devoid of it. With ignorance comes attachment to all that is pleasant to the ego as well as hatred and repulsion for all that is unpleasant. In that way the three poisons—ignorance, attachment, and hatred—come into being. Under the influence of these three poisons, the mind becomes like a servant running here and there. This is how the suffering of samsara is built up. It all derives from a lack of discernment and a distorted perception of the nature of phenomena.

Because of this distortion, some people perceive samsara as quite a happy place. They don't realize that it is pervaded with suffering. They imagine that the body is something exceedingly beautiful and desirable. They don't see that when investigated, it is found to be composed of rather foul substances. In this erroneous way of seeing things, we take suffering for happiness and perceive the impermanent world as permanent. We thus labor under four main misconceptions: believing that phenomena are pure when they are not; misconstruing suffering

for happiness; considering phenomena to be permanent when they are transitory; and imagining that there is a self abiding in the midst of all this, when there is none to be found.

These are the roots of afflictive mental states, the *kleshas*. To counteract them, we have to establish clearly the empty nature of the eight consciousnesses, the five aggregates, the five elements, and all phenomena, so that we correctly perceive their true nature, which is devoid of intrinsic existence.

There are different ways to come to such a conclusion and experience it directly. We may undertake a whole course of study, reflection, and meditation, which gives rise to a clear understanding of the relative and absolute truth. Or we may apprehend it directly through contemplative practice, and recognize through our own experience the dream-like nature of phenomena, which is the way of the yogis. These teachings help us to progress in both ways, through a logical investigation of mind and through experiencing and integrating the result of this investigation through meditation.

Here follow three sections: (1) how to meditate, (2) the measure of progress, and (3) the significance of the practice.

How to Meditate

To begin, we visualize in the space above our head Lord Buddha Shakyamuni radiating infinite light in all directions. Then we generate a strong, fervent devotion, supplicating:

May you bless me so that I will be able to recognize the impure nature of ordinary phenomena, that they are permeated with suffering, impermanent and devoid of any kind of "self."

Then we visualize rays of different colors emanating from the Buddha, blessing our minds so that such an understanding may take birth in our being.

*Imagine someone who stirs in you intense attachment,
And consider them now present vividly before you.*

For the actual investigation, we select the object for which we feel the strongest attachment, whether it is a person or any valuable or precious object to which we cling.

*Separate this person into five component skandhas,
And begin by investigating the physical body.*

Let's now examine this object. If we begin by examining a human body to which we are attached, we acknowledge that it is made up of five aggregates (*skandhas*): form, feeling, discrimination, impulse, and consciousness.

The first one, the aggregate of form, is the foundation for the other four, just as the earth is the supporting ground for all the mountains, forests, and lakes upon it. There are several aspects of this aggregate of form, but here we will investigate the one related to the human body.

It is because we cling to the entity of a body that even a tiny prick from a thorn makes us miserable. When there is warm sunshine outside, we feel comfortable and the body is pleased. We are constantly preoccupied with the comfort and attractiveness of our body and treat it like the most precious thing. Clinging to the body is the reason we experience such reactions to the pleasant and the unpleasant.

To eradicate this clinging, we have to examine what the body is really made of. Let's imagine that like a surgeon we cut a body open and separate all its major constituents—the blood, the flesh, the bones, the fat, the five main internal organs, the four limbs. The body also contains various fluids and excrements. Inside the body, it is said that there are eighty-four thousand different kinds of worms, bacteria, and other microscopic forms of life. Furthermore, there are eighty-four thousand hairs on the body, thirty-two teeth, and the fingernails and toenails.

If we consider these components separately, not a single one looks clean or pure. Taken one by one, each of the components does not seem at all appealing. The whole body is just a collection of rather disgusting parts, formed of the five elements. The flesh corresponds to the earth element, the blood and the other fluids correspond to the water element, the breath corresponds to the wind element, our body warmth corresponds to the fire element, and the cavities within the body correspond to the space element.

One of the main ways to decrease or eliminate our attachment to the body is to examine the various parts of the body one by one. If you were to take a piece of flesh from a body and place it someone's hand, the person would feel repelled. If we look at our skin from the outside, it may have an attractive color and be very smooth. But when we look at the inner side, the blood vessels and fat attached to it are not very attractive.

The skin itself is not an entity on its own. If one were to tear the skin into pieces, eventually it would be reduced to minute cells, molecules, and atoms. At this stage there is nothing left of something called "skin" that could constitute a self-existing entity. Even the atomic particles are in the end equivalent to energy and are devoid of intrinsic existence.

When we conduct such an examination of a human body, where has the object of our attachment gone? What is left for us to be attached to? We should keep examining each part more and more minutely until we reach the point where we cannot find the object of our attachment. At that point, the attachment itself just vanishes.

We can do exactly the same investigation with the bones and the blood. In each case, as we go deeper and deeper, the feeling of attachment is bound to vanish. Then we realize that the body is made of nothing but all these elusive things put together. We may think that the body is very beautiful and desirable, but if we look at its components, it is nothing but a collection of unpleasant things, a kind of walking machine.

You can pile up grass to the height of a mountain, but if you take each blade of grass one by one, you will end up with nothing, with no such thing as a "mountain" entity. In the same way, with many stones we can make a solid wall. But if we then remove the stones one by one, not even the name "wall" will be left. Sometimes bubbles appear on the surface of a body of water. From the outside they look like spheres, with a certain solid form that lasts. But when they burst, nothing is left. Similarly, we have taken for granted that the body is existent when in reality there is no such thing.

Unavoidably we come to the conclusion that the body does not truly exist. We have then recognized the void nature of our body and of ~~form~~ all forms.^{ok} When this state of understanding is reached, we simply rest for a while in the equanimity of this recognition. When a thought arises within this state, we repeat the same investigation.

Once it has been fully grasped that this “body” is empty of true existence, we can easily understand that it is the same with our “name” and with the “mind” made up of the thoughts that go through our consciousness.

In investigating the nature of phenomena, there are Four Seals or main points we should understand: (1) All things are compounded; that is, they are an assemblage of multiple elements instead of being unitary entities. (2) They are therefore impermanent and (3) are linked with suffering. (4) They are devoid of self-identity.

The compounded nature of phenomena is often explained by using the example of time. It is argued that since no common ground can be found between past, present, and future phenomena, they cannot logically constitute a single, unitary phenomena. For instance, how could a past thought and a present thought exist simultaneously or even come in contact with each other in any way, since the past thought no longer exists? If the father is already dead, how can he have a child?

Similarly, the present moment cannot have any actual contact with the future, not even for an instant. Otherwise the present would become the future or the future the present. It would be like saying that an unborn child is already here now.

The same is true for the process of the mind. Our past thoughts are like a corpse, and the present thought is like something that appears to exist. But there cannot be any contact between something that does not exist anymore and something that exists. At the same time, we do not know what thoughts we are going to have in the next few moments. The future thought is unborn, totally nonexistent. The present thought possesses some kind of reality, although it has no true intrinsic existence. It somehow appears, but it cannot have any contact with something that is not yet born.

As for impermanence, we have a very strong feeling that our body, our mind, our name, and our ego are all permanent. This leads to strong clinging. So, to gain certainty in the realization that all phenomena are utterly transitory is very important. It is like when a thief is unmasked and everyone learns his identity: he then becomes completely powerless to fool anyone, since all are aware of his mischievous nature. The thief can no longer harm anyone. In the same way, if we recognize that everything is impermanent—the universe as well as our thoughts—then naturally we will turn our backs on the objects of our grasping and embrace the Dharma as the only thing that can really benefit us.

Regarding the truth of suffering, we need to recognize that suffering is the condition of all phenomena pertaining to relative truth. Whatever is linked to the five aggregates is intimately connected with suffering. This is because grasping at the aggregates leads to the arising of the five mental poisons (*kleshas*)—hatred, desire, delusion, pride, and jealousy—which themselves are the causes of nothing but suffering. Even though we may enjoy some kind of temporary happiness in samsara, close inspection reveals that we have often achieved this happiness at the expense of others, or even through harming others, by cheating, stealing, and the like. In behaving like this, although we experience a fleeting happiness, at the same time we are creating causes for our future misery. It is like eating plants that are tasty but poisonous. We may savor them for a few moments, but soon afterward we will die. It is the same for all enjoyments that are linked with negative actions.

Once we realize this, we no longer take pleasure in samsaric life, and our desire for it is completely exhausted. This leads to a strong wish to renounce our attachment to worldly affairs and our addiction to the causes of suffering.

The final one of the four points is about the negative consequence of clinging to the self and the recognition that phenomena are devoid of self-identity. All of the first three points boil down to grasping at self, the main cause of suffering in samsara. Once we latch onto the concepts of “I” and “mine,” anything that seems to threaten that “self”—or an extension of it, such as friends and relatives—is identified as an “enemy.” This leads to craving, hatred, and lack of discernment, the basic causes of samsara

How did this happen at all? It happened because of our mental process, the chain of thoughts. For instance, the thought comes to your mind, “I shall leave my retreat and go into town,” and you follow it. You go into town and perform all kinds of actions there, accumulating a great deal of karma. If, at the moment the thought first arose, it had occurred to you, “There is no point in going to town,” the sequence of thoughts would have been interrupted and all the impulses that followed would have never have occurred. Nothing will happen at all. The cause of delusion is the linking of thoughts, one thought leading to the other and forming a garland of thoughts. We need to free ourselves from these automatic processes. This is the reason for these teachings, which are like a spinning wheel of lucid investigation of the nature of discursive thoughts and the ego. After paying attention to the teacher's words, we should also put them into

practice and investigate thoroughly our thoughts and our psychophysical aggregates, until we gain a true certainty about their nature.

Until now, we had the strong conviction that the self exists as a separate entity. With the help of these teaching, we can now achieve a strong and firm conviction that the ego has no true existence. This will lead to the gradual disappearance of afflictive emotions and thoughts.

In turn, this will lead to mastering the mind. In our ordinary condition, when a thought of hatred arises, we have no idea how to deal with it. We let that thought grow and become stronger. This could eventually lead us to seize a weapon and go to war. It all began with a thought, nothing more. Look at the succession of thoughts that lead to full-blown hatred: The past thoughts are dead and gone. The present thoughts will soon vanish. There is nothing graspable in either of them. So, if we examine the thoughts in depth, we cannot find anything truly existing in them. Under scrutiny, they vanish like a big heap of grass set ablaze. Nothing will be left of it.

We really must verify for ourselves that whatever thought comes into our mind has never acquired any true existence: thoughts are never born, they never dwell as something truly existing, and they have nowhere to go when they disappear from our mind.

Unless we come to a clear understanding of this, why talk about things like the “primordial purity of the Great Perfection” or the “innate wisdom of the Mahamudra”? None of these will help, so long as we perceive phenomena in a deluded way, like the jaundiced eye perceiving a white conch as yellow.

We have spoken of the main ways in which we distort reality: by assuming that conditioned phenomena are endowed with true existence; that fleeting phenomena are permanent; that samsara is generally imbued with happiness despite the pervasiveness of suffering; and that there could ever be such a thing as an autonomous, truly existing self.

Now we have to replace these distorted perceptions with accurate ways of thinking. Instead of being convinced that there is a self entity, we realize that self is a mere concept. We should get used to this and impress it on our minds. To achieve this, we must investigate with determined effort the nonexistence of the self until we have covered every aspect of the analysis. Then, like someone who has finally completed an exhausting journey after painstakingly walking over a long distance, we can completely relax in the natural void state of mind. Without entertaining any thoughts, we simply rest in equanimity for a while.

After we have recovered our mental strength, thoughts will return. Instead of falling under their influence, apply the same investigation over again, and remain clearly mindful of the nonexistence of the self. This will result in a genuine and powerful realization of the absence of a truly existing self.

There are two aspects of mindfulness: first, to remember what causes suffering and needs to be avoided, and what brings happiness and needs to be accomplished; and second, to be constantly vigilant lest we fall under the power of delusion. If we mechanically follow our wandering thoughts instead of remembering to investigate our mind, afflictive emotions such as craving and hatred will rise up strongly. Whenever these assail your mind, you should react just as if you had seen an enemy coming at you: lift the weapon of mindfulness and resume your investigation of the mind.

Simply by turning on the light, you can instantly destroy the darkness. Likewise, even a rather simple analysis of ego-clinging and afflictive emotions can make them collapse. By suppression we may temporarily subdue our afflictive emotions, but only an investigation of their true nature will completely eradicate them.

The Measure of Progress

Once this is accomplished, a great happiness will settle in the mind. As soon as we notice deluded thoughts arising in relation to conditioned phenomena, generating the scorching heat of samsara, we will recognize the unsurpassable, supreme, unconditioned nature of nirvana, which bestows a cooling, pacifying shade.

Following our analysis, we should check whether or not the practice has taken birth within us. Having pursued this investigation over and again, we naturally arrive at a genuine understanding that all our aggregates, like all phenomena, are molded by numberless fleeting causes and conditions. They are compounded things, so that if we take them apart there is nothing left such as a “body” or any of the other entities whose existence we are so convinced of. We will know without doubt that there are no permanent phenomena, since everything changes at every moment.

We will also know that all phenomena are linked with suffering, and that various ways of assuming the existence of a “self,” are all groundless. Thus, we will have thoroughly integrated these Four Seals of the Buddha’s teaching into our understanding. From then on, our mindfulness

will come naturally and we won't have to exert so much effort to maintain it. This achievement comes from the power of gaining confidence in the fact that phenomena are devoid of true, inherent existence. A great master once declared that the solidity of the phenomenal world will start to collapse even if one simply begins to doubt that phenomena are truly existing and merely glimpses the fact that emptiness is the nature of all phenomena and appearances.

When we begin to win the struggle to free ourselves from the waves of afflictive emotions, the mind will become like a calm and vast lake. This peaceful state, the natural tranquility of mind, will lead to deep samadhi, which is the pacification of wandering, deluded thoughts.

What is more, our mind will gain the natural capacity to focus one-pointedly on any object of concentration. This understanding will open up a deeper, vaster insight (*vipashyana*). This pacification of the mind is essential to all vehicles—the Fundamental Vehicle, the Great Vehicle, and the Adamantine Vehicle.

The Significance of the Practice

The third part explains the need for engaging in the practice of investigation.

All phenomena appear as result of a web of interdependent causes and conditions, which are as devoid of intrinsic existence as things seen in a dream. Once we understand this, it becomes clear that from the very beginning all phenomena are “unborn.” They never came into true existence. By realizing that all phenomena are devoid of “self,” or “identity” and that their nature is emptiness, we are freed from grasping at extreme concepts such as “existence” and “nonexistence.”

If, for instance, we had been thinking that phenomena were made of autonomous entities, we will now understand that truly separate and intrinsically distinct entities could not relate with one another and thus could not come together to form a “body.” If, at the other extreme, we believed that phenomena consist of single unitary entities such as a “body,” then we would not be able to distinguish any parts within it, such as form, feelings, volition, and so on—yet we have done so. The indisputable conclusion is that phenomena consist neither of truly separate, autonomous parts nor of singular entities.

Realizing this freedom from all conceptual extremes, we attain realization of the great expanse of the indivisible evenness. This understanding corresponds to the first *bhumi* of the Great Vehicle, which is the ultimate realization of the path of seeing. Not only will we

understand the ultimate nature of emptiness, but we will also realize the wisdom of the absolute expanse of luminous awareness. And as it says in the *Prajnaparamita*, the *Transcendent Perfection of Wisdom*:

“Mind.

Mind does not exist.

Its expression is luminosity.”

“Mind” here refers to the deluded mind. “Mind does not exist” refers to the understanding of the emptiness of true existence. “Its expression is luminosity” refers to the luminous wisdom aspect of emptiness.

This luminous or wisdom aspect is what is called the essence of buddhahood, or *tathagatagarba*, which is present in all sentient beings. Even when we don’t have a full and ultimate understanding of emptiness, as a buddha does, merely to have a glimpse of it will make the deluded perception of phenomena collapse.

Moreover, once we have reached the thorough realization of emptiness, an all-pervading compassion will manifest within it naturally. Thus we will dwell neither in the extreme of samsara nor in the extreme of nirvana. We will swiftly reach the level of buddhahood, in which all past accumulated karma—as well as the obscuring and afflictive mental states and emotions that caused it—will have been purified. It is a place where there is nothing but absolute bliss, and where even the word “suffering” has never been heard.

This is called the Great Uncompoundedness or the Great Uncreated State. By this we do not mean a state like death, extinction, or nothingness. It is the primordial nature of all phenomena, which is uncompounded. With this understanding of ultimate nature, the qualities of the other transcended perfections (*paramitas*) will reach their height.

This is exceedingly difficult to understand, however, for it is the ultimate meaning of the eighty-four thousand sections of the Dharma, the secret quintessence of all the teachings, which is very hard to grasp. It may be called coemergent great bliss or primordial wisdom. All the phenomena of samsara and nirvana take place within such state. If we follow the structure of the five paths, such an understanding corresponds to the path of seeing, which is reached after having traveled for a very long time on the path of accumulation and the path of joining.

However, one may also reach such an understanding in a direct way, through the pith instructions of an authentic and realized spiritual teacher. This is the way of the pith instructions that point to the true nature in a direct way, according to the tradition of the Great Perfection.

This is the ultimate, definite meaning of the profound section of the tantras, the view of the Secret Mantrayana. It is the excellent path of the discriminating investigation that destroys all the forms of delusion. Such investigation is a necessary foundation to all paths.

When the deluded, confusing emotions are completely eliminated through the power of such investigation, we arrive at a clear certainty that the aggregates of outer phenomena are, by nature, completely devoid of true existence. Our compulsive clinging to the three realms of samsara will disappear.

Having thus meditated on the voidness of all phenomena, and having analyzed all their aspects, we can dwell in a state of perfect simplicity and peace, free from concepts and discursive thoughts. When thoughts arise, just apply the same analysis once more. By doing so, you will be able to remain in an effortless inner calm and peace. Even though we have to make sustained efforts to begin with, when we reach to the realization of the empty nature of all phenomena, we will no longer need to apply any effort to get rid of obscuring mental states. Nor will there be any need to apply specific antidotes to the various emotional afflictions. Everything will be natural and free from clinging to conceptual extremes, unaffected by attachment or repulsion. Attachment is transformed into unconditional love and compassion for all sentient beings. For one who has realized the void nature, spontaneous compassion arises for all living beings who suffer because they have not realized this empty nature.

When we obtain a glimpse of this absolute nature, which is called the “absolute expanse,” we will fly through this expanse like a bird soaring effortlessly through the sky. We will thus pass through samsara, the world of existence, without any fear or hardship.

Universal compassion arises when ordinary attachment disappears. It is the sublime attachment, that of all-pervading compassion for sentient beings, which transcends ordinary attachment. When this happens, we fly with ease through the absolute expanse, completely without fear of samsara. We thus achieve the supreme level of the bodhisattvas, the sublime level of absolute *bodhichitta*. There are two levels of *bodhichitta*: the relative and the absolute. The relative is the ordinary *bodhichitta* directed to particular beings, and the absolute *bodhichitta* is the realization of the absolute nature of the absolute expanse of emptiness.

As is clearly mentioned by the Buddha himself in various sutras, this preliminary path of inner calm and deeper insight, *shamatha* and *vipashyana*, is the necessary entrance not only to the fundamental vehicle, but to all the paths of the Buddha's teachings, including the Mahayana and the Vajrayana. It is necessary to analyze and purify the mind-stream. The more we do this practice, the more the deluded emotions decrease, the thinner our tendencies become, and the easier it is to achieve the natural serenity of mind. A very pure gold is obtained through the refining process, by melting and beating the metal.

In the same way, the true nature of mind is realized when we discipline our mind and investigate it thoroughly, and finally become free from ordinary clinging through the pacification of deluded thoughts..

We may offer all that is perfect in this universe—flowers, perfumes, and every beautiful object—to the Three Jewels for a thousand years. But all these merits are nothing compared with the merit accrued through the understanding that all phenomena are compounded, that conditioned phenomena are pervaded with suffering, impermanent, and devoid of self. Simply to have these thoughts in your mind for the time it takes to snap your fingers generate merits that are immeasurably greater than vast material offerings offered continually over a thousand years.

In essence, the Four Seals of the Mahayana teaching are these: all conditioned phenomena are impermanent; whatever is tainted by obscuring emotion is pervaded with suffering; nirvana transcends suffering; and phenomena are devoid of self. All eighty-four thousand sections of the Buddha's teachings are contained in these four tenets.

By understanding these tenets, we will easily and swiftly master the great treasure of wisdom, understanding and realizing the profound and vast aspect of the teaching. This will allow us to meditate in the proper way on the essential points of the whole of the Buddha's teaching. To meditate on the Four Seals is to meditate on the meaning of thousand of sutras.

This concludes the main explanation of “The Wheel of Investigation and Meditation That Thoroughly Purifies Mental Activity.”